**Overview**

*The Road*, winner of the 2007 Pulitzer Prize, is Cormac McCarthy’s most accessible novel, one which immediately gained a foothold in book clubs and on school reading lists across America. It also joins [*All the Pretty Horses*](http://www.enotes.com/all-pretty-qn) and [*Blood Meridian*](http://www.enotes.com/blood-meridian-salem/blood-meridian-11000053) as one of McCarthy’s most critically acclaimed novels, though a departure from his usual western settings and themes. In a rare interview, McCarthy told Oprah Winfrey that his four-year-old son John practically cowrote the book: “I suppose it is a love story to my son.”

Set sometime in the future after a global catastrophe, *The Road* chronicles a father and a son—maybe the last of the “good guys”—as they tread along a forsaken patch of highway peopled by marauders and cannibals. The novel can be read in a variety of ways. *The Road* is perhaps the most chilling commentary of the post-9/11 world. The post-apocalyptic setting plays upon the public’s fear of terrorism, pandemics, genocide, and weapons of mass destruction. Other readers hear the poetic passages of desolation and think of [Dante’s descent into hell](http://www.enotes.com/dantes-inferno/) or T. S. Eliot’s [*The Waste Land*](http://www.enotes.com/waste-land). Michael Chabon, in his essay “Dark Adventure,” says the novel is both horror and epic adventure, that McCarthy deftly blends the Southern Gothic of [William Faulkner](http://www.enotes.com/authors/william-faulkner) and the extreme naturalism of [Jack London](http://www.enotes.com/authors/jack-london). Still others see McCarthy continuing to wrestle with the existence of God, as the father tells the boy, “There is no God and we are his prophets.” The novel certainly plays upon a parent’s worst fears, but because its father-son relationship is crafted so tenderly, the overall effect is, ironically, anything but morbid.

*The Road* is McCarthy at the height of his powers. The father and son’s journey to “carry the fire” is not only a testament to McCarthy’s love for his son but his faith in humanity.

**Why is carrying the fire in Cormac McCarthy's novel The Road so significant?**

"Fire" is mentioned 76 times in the novel.  Most of the time it is used literally to mean fire.  A few times is it used as a metaphor by the father and/or son.

Pg. 83: "Nothing bad is going to happen to us...because we're carrying the fire."

Pg. 129: "We're the good guys...and we're carrying the fire."

Pg. 172: "I havent seen a fire in a long time, thats all.  I live like an animal."

Pg. 186: "Nowhere to build a fire.  Nowhere safe."

Pg. 216: "Are they carrying the fire too?  They could be yes.  But we dont know.  So we have to be vigilant."

Possible uses as a symbol:

As metaphor, it is fire: that which is used for survival, warmth, cooking, protection.  Will the gun "fire"?

Ironically, the earth seems to have been destroyed by fire, so it could symbolize the apocalypse.

It could symbolize death.  If the truck people or cannibals see their fire, they could be killed.  "Firing" the gun kills the one trucker.  It could also end the father's and son's life--as it did the mother's--in suicide.

Metaphorically, it is hope, faith, God, the past, the future, humanity, survival, goodness, family.

**What is the importance of the father-son relationship in The Road?**

*The Road* chronicles a father and a son who tread along a forsaken patch of highway peopled by marauders and cannibals.  The father and son may be the last of the “good guys” left on earth.  The book certainly plays upon a parent’s worst fears, but because its father-son relationship is crafted so tenderly, the overall effect is, ironically, anything but morbid.

According to McCarthy, the key to survival in the post-9/11 world is keeping his son, "the fire," alive.  We learn that the father is going to die, so his survival is not the question: he has a horrific cough because he has breathed so much ash. The boy is a personification of the fire and survival.  The father is holding on to dear life to get his son on down the road, out of harm's way, toward a new family, to the coast.  The entire human race may very well depend on the boy's survival: he is a kind of savior (Christ-figure) and Holy Grail.  The boy is prince Hamlet to his father’s Ghost of King Hamlet. The boy is the meek and forgiving Christ to his father’s vengeful Yahweh.

The conversations they have keep the fire going as much as anything. They are a joy to read. McCarthy omits conventions (commas, quotations, and sometimes question marks) because they intrude on the poetry and prose.  He's a poet novelist, and he's got a lot of e.e. cummings in him.  He wants to expose the words in their bare beauty.

Since they only have each other to talk, the two resort to this Socratic method of dialogue.  The boys asks, and the father answers.  Toward the end, the boy arrives at a conclusion, and the father answers.  The boy is the student, and the father a teacher.  *The Road*, then, is a kind of mobile Socratic seminar, a walking discourse.

**Why does the father throw out the mother's picture while traveling on the road?**

On page 15 of *The Road*, the father discards all of his former life's identification:

He'd carried his billfold about till it wore a cornershaped hole in his trousers. Then one day he sat by the roadside and took it out and went through the contents. Some money, credit cards. His driver's license. A picture of his wife. He spread everything out on the blacktop. Like gaming cards. He pitched the sweatblackened piece of leather into the woods and sat **holding the photograph. Then he laid it down in the road also** and then he stood and they went on.

In the post-apocalyptic world, all forms of money, credit, identification, and memories are worthless.  Cannibals can't be bribed.  Road warriors don't take credit.  Even one's spouse is a figment of the past.  All that matters is the boy, survival, and carrying the fire.

Also, the mother committed suicide.  She gave up on the family.  She extinguished her fire.  She refused to walk the road.  Her photograph is a haunting memory of the father's worst nightmare: that he too will have to use the two bullets in the gun to kill himself and his son.  Why carry around that reminder?  Her photograph is a constant reminder of self-annihilation.  It is best discarded with the other worthless relics of the past.

**In The Road, there are cannibals, looters, and pilgrims.  Who are the pilgrims?**

In Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, the man and the boy are pilgrims carrying the fire.  The family that the boy meets in the end is also made of pilgrims carrying the fire.  On this God-forsaken road in post-Apacolyptic America, it seems that the nuclear family is fire in and of itself.  These lone families are pilgrims not only in a quest for their own basic survival, but for the future generations of humanity.  Without them, humankind is surely doomed.

The man and the boy's first pilgrimage is to get to the ocean, presumably because they think it will be a better climate for survival.  When the father reaches the sea, he is disappointed to learn that the pilgrimage was in vain: the ocean is no better than the mainland.

His ulterior motive in this pilgrimage is to deliver the boy to a new father or family before he dies.  But, the man does not trust anyone.  He even tells the boy to kill himself rather than be taken alive by a looter or cannibal.  This pilgrimage is based on faith, and the father clearly does have any faith left in others.  So, it's another pilgrimage in vain.

His ultimate hope is for the boy to make his own pilgrimage.  After the father dies, the boy indeed goes back onto the road and lets himself be found by the man with the shotgun.  If his father were still alive, it's doubtful the boy would have done this (his father would have hidden or run).  So, it is the boy's pilgrimage back onto the road at the end--one that could have doomed him--that is the greatest pilgrimage of all.  The boys restores his faith in humanity, and the fire keeps a-goin'.

**I have to complete a plot diagram about "The Road.”  Can you help me?**

Expostion: we learn that a series of concussions has caused a world-wide blackout, that the son was born after the blackout, that the boy's mother committed suicide soon after, and that the father, who is sick and has a gun with two bullets, wants to travel southwest along the road to the ocean.  The novel starts *in medias res*, so most of this expostion comes in bits and pieces of flashbacks strewn throughout the novel.

Rising Action/Complication: we learn that cannibals and bands marauders threaten the tandem, that the father and son must hide from them in order to survive, that the father and son must compete with these subhumans for food, shelter, warmth, and recources.

Climax: a cannible captures the boy and threatens to kill him.  The father shoots him, and they escape.  The man only has one bullet left for the two of them.  He ponders shooting the boy, should they get captured.

Falling Action: the father and son find a shelter that is stocked full of ample supplies.  This seems like a haven, a home, but the father knows that it is too exposed to be safe for long. They must abandon it.

Resolution: the father and son reach the ocean.  The father threatens to kill a man along the road, but the boy talks him out of it.  The father soon dies, and the boy walks onto the road.

Denoument: The boy is discovered by the man with the shotgun who has been following them for some time.  The boy goes with this man and becomes part of his family.